

Ethical implications of music education as a helping profession

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ABSTRACT

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As professionals, music teachers are faced with a range of ethical responsibilities that are tied to the particular benefits that the music education profession, by its very existence, promises to contribute to graduates' musical abilities and future musical options. However, the ethical dimensions of music education are too often overlooked, both in the preparation of new teachers and in evaluating the practices of in-service teachers.

This study provides a philosophical review of key aspects of normative ethics that merit being acknowledged and addressed if music education is to be most fully ethical and music teachers most productively professional. To clarify this ethical responsibility, duty, consequentialist, and virtue ethics are briefly surveyed and common grounds between them are noted in order to recommend a range of criteria for an applied professional ethics of music education. Certain teaching practices from school music and individual lessons are offered as evidence that ethical failings are often involved in many common music teaching practices and that an applied ethics can help music teachers to be most fully professional and effective.

Keywords: professional teaching ethics, normative ethics, applied ethics, music education.

Introduction

According to functionalist sociology, a society creates particular social structures to accomplish basic *functions* it needs to survive. Thus, the helping professions, such as medicine, law, therapy, and the ministry, have evolved to promote human wellbeing and, thus, society. Teaching, similarly conceived, is not simply a specialized occupation; it is a *helping profession*. With such professional standing, however, comes the ethical responsibility of serving those for whom the profession exists: students and society. As professionals, then, the ethical responsibilities of music teachers are tied to their implied

promise to contribute in *functional* ways to students' musical abilities and dispositions and, through these, to the life well-lived.

However, this ethical responsibility is too often overlooked in training or evaluating teachers. On the assumption that music is good, the corresponding assumption is taken for granted that simply providing musical "experiences" in schools and studios is automatically aesthetically good, and that such musical "activities" are therefore routinely beneficial and educative. This leads to an "anything goes" ethics of *radical relativism* where just about any teaching is regarded as "good enough."

This study briefly summarizes the three leading normative ethical theories and related meta-ethical issues that warrant being acknowledged and addressed if teaching music is to be most fully ethical and music teachers most fully professional.

Normative and applied ethics

To begin with, *normative ethics* propose criteria for ethical conduct. However, such normative criteria are often compromised by the often unique particulars and messy details of actual cases. The principle of *proportionalism* thus allows 'bending' norms when important situated variables take precedence; for example, lying to save a life.

In contrast, *applied ethics*—also called *situation* or *practical* ethics (Singer 1997)—begin with typical cases and needs, and reason from them to relevant ethical criteria. Applied ethics guide the various professions; for example, legal and medical ethics. However, applied ethics draw from normative theories (and other sources) and tend to establish norms of 'due care' for their respective fields.

Most helping professions therefore formally educate new members about the profession's ethical standards. This has not been typical in teacher education, however. Most ethical criteria for teachers are matters of statutory law (e.g., laws against physical punishment), amount to platitudes (e.g., be considerate to all students), or are common sense (e.g., do not get romantically involved with students). Typically missing is the central ethical criterion that arises from the *function* for which the teaching profession exists. To be effective and ethical, then, music teaching should fulfill its responsibility to provide the clearly *functional musical benefits* its very existence promises to students and society. Failure to produce such benefits results in an escalating *legitimation crisis* that requires ever-more political 'advocacy' to justify the continued status, even existence, of music education—particularly of "school music."

To clarify this ethical responsibility, the normative theories of duty, consequentialist, and virtue ethics will be surveyed with a view to identifying a range of potential criteria that can contribute to an applied, professional ethics of music education.

Duty ethics

Duty theories (also called deontological, from the Greek *deon* for duty) state *obligations* that follow from their stipulated criteria, such as the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, or Immanuel Kant's various "categorical imperatives." Duty theories also follow criteria that flow from the concept of *rights*—as regards the teaching profession, students' rights.

One problem with duty theories is that a duty is *categorical*—an absolute ought—and thus an action that fulfills a duty can be regarded as ethical regardless of its consequences; for example, a teacher's ethical duty can be regarded as fulfilled simply by offering instruction, even if results are negative or inconsequential. However, certain ethical criteria from duty ethics can fruitfully apply to music education, chief among them being the prevailing duty to provide the functional musical benefits the profession exists to serve.

Duty ethics and music education

First and foremost, is the duty that professional actions should benefit students in *functional* ways, not the teacher, and not music programs as though ends-in-themselves. Instruction—whether in school classes and ensembles or individual lessons—should not, therefore, be a pre-existing mold into which students are force-fit, or that limits their musical options. 'One-size-fits-all' didactics assume that all students are alike in background, ability, and interests, and share common needs. They also assume that teaching situations (demographic contexts, resources, schedules, national curriculums, etc.) are interchangeable and respond equally or in the same ways to technicist teaching. Ensembles and instrumental instruction are often predicated mainly (or even solely) on either "good music" as decreed by academe, or "school music" that similarly attempts to advance "good taste."

Too often, however, both school and non-school based ensemble programs become autonomous, and students end up serving the program rather than the program serving their musical needs and interests. And individual lessons often submit students to uniform methods and materials that ignore individual differences and interests, or that assume all students are being prepared to seek careers as professional musicians. However, serving the educational functions of life-long learning and life-long "musicking" (Small 1998) depends on teaching that prepares students for far more than the next concert, recital, or lesson. Without such carry-over to life outside of and after graduation from school, music teachers risk failing in their duty to provide the function for which music education exists: the functional advancement of a student's musical abilities and options. The ethical criterion, then, is: What can the student *do*—at all, better, more often, or with greater reward—as a result of instruction?

A second general duty is the ethical injunction to “do no harm.” This is violated when students are physically harmed. For example, some pedagogies and didactics violate the biomechanics of young and still developing bodies and can produce medical conditions. Similarly, the harmful effects of rehearsing or practicing in acoustically unsuitable spaces are increasingly being recognized and researched. And, of course, students who have learned only to dislike their required music classes, or who have not had their musical (and other) needs and interests met, in effect have been ‘harmed’ by not benefiting functionally from instruction in ways that are meaningful and lasting.

Third, the *right of students to be safe* includes being safe from psychological harassment or exploitation. Violators include music teachers who resort to embarrassment and intimidating tactics that can have serious, even long-term, negative psychological consequences for students. Teachers who strategically employ insensitive challenge or audition systems rely on a dubious educational and ethical principle because, in such situations, a student reaches his or her goal only at the expense of all other students not meeting theirs.

The duty *to be fair and just* is a fourth right due to students. Fair and just treatment is denied when music teachers serve only an elite or self-selected few; or where students sense that certain students are the ‘teacher’s pet’ (which often causes social problems for them with peers). Excluding students by competition and audition, or because the program or pedagogy offers little that interests them musically fails to meet their musical and other needs. Ignoring those who lose interest or quit rather than redoubling teaching efforts to meet their needs, also falls short of the functionalist duty to serve *all* students’ musical needs fairly.

A fifth traditional duty is to *benefit the needy*. This duty relies on the premise that music education is a calling that exists to altruistically benefit the musical needs of students. In this, a “need” is understood in terms of the skills and understanding required to be musically active in pragmatic ways, and it also includes expanding musical choices beyond those students enter school with; for example, as learned from family, church, ethnic group, community, or nation. Thus, their individual needs and interests must be diagnosed and then met, instead of being dictated—as is the case when students are treated as though they all have the same needs, or to meet the ‘standard’ needs of the school program or ensemble.

Furthermore, such altruism implies results that are unequivocally beneficial. Teaching that produces *no discernible benefits* is ethically *unaccountable* and thus unwarranted because its virtue cannot be determined. Similarly, teaching that produces *no lasting benefits* as far as students’ musical choices and musicking as adults can also be doubted as to its functional contributions and, thus, as to its ethical status. Students whose musical abilities and options have not been advanced in notable ways—a kind of ‘value added’ ethical and curricular criterion—have not been ethically or musically served well; such students and society in general have not been benefitted by the functional professional ethic expected of a helping profession.

The sixth duty follows from a basic conception of human rights: *allowing and promoting free expression*. However, this duty is often difficult to meet with large ensembles and can be met more readily, for example, with a well-planned offering of solos, duets, trios, and so on. And instead of dictating all musical decisions, ensemble directors and studio teachers should promote the *independent musicianship* that facilitates the learner's own decision-making ability in the service of life-long musicking.

Last among traditional ethical duties to be discussed here is one of Kant's lesser known categorical imperatives: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity . . . never simply as a *means*, but always at the same time as an *end*" (trans. Vardy & Grosch 1999: 58; italics added). Since students are the ends for which music education exists as a helping profession, the duty follows that it is *their* musical benefits and satisfactions that ought to be benefitted. If music or the teacher's needs are the ends for which music education exists, then students' musical needs are sacrificed and teaching fails to meet its ethical obligations to them. Despite their self-congratulatory 'high standards', teachers who teach as though protecting music from students answer the age-old question of whether we teach students or music by favoring the latter, rather than achieving a balance that serves each side of the equation.

However, a teacher may also benefit (musically and otherwise) and still be ethical as long as students also clearly benefit as much as or more than the teacher. This provision is further clarified by consequentialist ethics.

Consequentialist ethics

Instead of focusing on *duties*, consequentialism focuses on *observable* and *pragmatic results*. It promotes an applied ethics based on concrete criteria of professional accountability based on the function(s) for which the helping profession exists.

Contemporary consequentialism stems from the *utilitarianism* of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. This philosophy introduced the concept of "utility" to ethical theory: for an action to be ethical, consequences should be *useful* for those affected by it. Thus, to be fully ethical on this account, the 'good' supposedly served by teaching must clearly be useful for students, not just supposedly good for them on some vague or noble-sounding grounds. Results also need to be truly consequential: they should contribute to a *significant* need and to a *functional* degree of usefulness.

Furthermore, an ethical action is one that produces "the greatest good for the greatest number," as the saying goes. Moreover, an action is "good" that, overall, is more productive of happiness or pleasure or more avoiding of unhappiness or pain than its alternatives. However, for consequentialism "pleasure" is understood in terms of wellbeing or thriving rather than hedonistically, while "pain" refers to undesirable results, such as boredom or aversion.

Consequentialism and music education

For consequentialism, then, music education is most ethical when it pragmatically advances students' present and future musical wellbeing. School music and individual lessons thus carryover functionally to life and contribute to society.

First, instead of focusing on duties deemed to be ethical regardless of results, consequentialism analyzes the possibility of both positive *and* negative consequences; then it judges whether the potential positives outweigh the negative risks. In schools, however, the differing musical needs of the greatest number of students usually cannot be addressed by large ensembles. And instrumental and voice teachers whose skill-drill demands result in students losing interest and 'dropping out' (actually or mentally) have failed to consider the negative consequences of their teaching. Again, protecting music *from* students is not an ethically warranted consequence. Technique, taught as though for its own sake, goes for naught when students quit lessons for lack of musical interest: they wanted to study music, not scales and exercises. And this includes literature requirements that fail to in any way or degree take students' own musical choices and interests into consideration. Students practice sports drills because they see the direct relevance of the skills gained to the pleasures derived from improved performance. Music students resist skills drilled in isolation from real music-making when they cannot similarly connect practiced skills to enhanced rewards of performance.

Secondly, unlike the ethical criteria duty ethics stipulate in *advance*, for consequentialism the ethical merit and value of teaching choices and actions are seen only *after the fact*, in terms of their pragmatic musical usefulness for students. Thus, all teaching decisions are treated as hypotheses that need to be tested in action for their utility. If a hypothesis concerning methods, materials, curriculum (etc.) fails to provide effective (which is to say, pragmatically useful) results, then alternative or remedial actions need to be taken based on alternate hypotheses. This amounts to a kind of informal and on-going action research and to so-called "reflective practice." Students who practice too little or who fail to progress are symptoms of a failure to address this ethical criterion. Just assigning practice is not enough: students need to learn *how* to practice *efficiently* and *effectively* and, thus, be rewarded from their efforts by musically satisfying progress.

Third, consequentialism is keenly aware that some teaching actions—no matter how dutiful or constructive the intentions—may have negative consequences. Ethical responsibility thus requires special efforts on behalf of students who fall behind or in any way lose interest. Blaming parents for not enforcing practice or the seductions of TV, computer games (etc.) is an ethical 'cop-out'! On the assumption that everyone is attracted to music and is rewarded by it, means are sought by which negative results are overcome by rewarding results. This can involve wholesale changes in the literature chosen and a reconsideration of basic pedagogical premises.

Fourth, the pragmatic focus of consequentialism is on the needs of particular students. Unlike duty ethics, then, no 'one-size-fits-all' teaching practice can be ethical.

Diagnosis of students' always unique circumstances and changing needs is required. Thus, just as "good health" is not the same thing for an 8-year-old as for an 80-year-old, 'musical good health' varies according to a host of individual variables. Music teachers who are like a doctor who wants only healthy patients proceed on very weak ethical grounds. And it precisely the challenge of meeting such variable needs that is the source of the personal and professional rewards of teaching.

Finally, consequentialism is keenly alert to observable differences between the *anticipated benefits* and the *actual consequences* promoted for the musical thriving of students and graduates. Results that are neither readily apparent nor unmistakably beneficial to students' musical wellbeing suggest the failure to fulfill the functional contribution music education exists to promote and thus the failure to meet the ethical responsibility of the profession. For example, simply assuming that students are automatically benefitted "aesthetically" from any and all musical "activities" and "experiences," despite no advancing of their present skills and while retaining their existing tastes, choices, and interests into adulthood, risks the ethical failure of 'making no difference' and, thus, of failing to provide the functional benefits for which the profession exists.

Virtue ethics provide further criteria for applied ethics.

Virtue ethics

Instead of focusing on *obligations* (as duty ethics do) or *anticipating beneficial results* (as does consequentialism), virtue ethics focus on *personal traits* of the agent—in particular, on a disposition for practical judgment based on a reasoned prior judgment of the 'good' to be served by a teaching action.

Virtue ethics first gained prominence in the writings of Aristotle who distinguished between ethical and intellectual virtue. For Aristotle, "virtue" did not have the moralistic sense that it has today, particularly in connection with religion and good 'morals'. "Virtue," instead, was regarded as the *excellence* that fulfilled the 'good' for which an action was undertaken. *Ethical* virtue (excellence) involves twelve character traits that Aristotle regarded as inborn or a result of upbringing, such as patience and courage. However, *intellectual* virtue (excellence) includes three "primary" kinds of acquired knowledge and skill: *theoria*, *techne*, and *praxis*. Actually, Aristotle cited five "primary" intellectual virtues (Aristotle 1998: 140-147): the three forms of acquired knowledge, plus intelligence (*nous*) and wisdom (*sophia*). Intelligence supports any cognitive endeavor, and wisdom is the holistic result of character, learning, and experience.

Theoria involves speculative reason and its active form is contemplation. However, unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle stipulated that ethical actions depend on *practical*

reason, not theoretical speculation. Thus he wrote: “the virtue [excellence] of a thing [or action] is relative to its proper work” (Aristotle 1998: 138). Accordingly, the “proper work”—the functional or pragmatic end(s)-in-view for always unique practical situations and needs—provide the criteria for *empirically* judging the virtue of an action, thus avoiding “anything goes” relativism.

Techne involves the creating of practical ‘things’. It relies on technical and cognitive skills that can be passed on, practiced, and applied routinely to usually uncontroversial ends. Its active ethical form is *poēisis*, or “excellent making.” Because ‘things’—including performances, productions, events, etc.—not *people* are at stake, mistakes typically carry no ethical responsibility. However, when teaching is approached as *techne*—that is, as a craft-like collection of routinized, technical strategies and ‘how to’ teaching ‘tools’ employed as ‘what works’ recipes for achieving taken for granted ends—then then it deteriorates into a process that treats students as though they are interchangeable ‘things’ on a factory assembly line.

In contrast to *techne*, then, *praxis* is a ‘doing’ or action that serves the always unique (and often changing) needs of individuals. Accordingly, *praxis* is centrally concerned with the ethical criterion of promoting ‘good’ or ‘right results’, as judged in terms of their discernible functional contributions to the present and future wellbeing of students.

Praxis thus involves knowledge that promotes ‘right’ or ‘virtuous [excellent] action’, and it depends on the active virtue of *phronēsis*: the ethical need to be caring, wise, and far-sighted in bringing about ‘right [excellent] results’ and prudent in doing no harm. *Malpraxis* is the failure to achieve ‘right results’ or the failure to avoid harm. It is important to stress that malpractice in the helping professions is not a failure to observe *standardized* practices or methods; in the helping professions, practices are properly tailored to the non-standard needs of different individuals (even to different needs at different times in a person’s life). Malpractice, instead, is the lack of having observed *ethical standards* of ‘due care’ and, thus, having created harmful or negative results. The practical wisdom on which teaching as *praxis* depends therefore requires an *ethic of caring* that is focused on the needs of students (as much as, or more than on musical values) and of being prudent in decisions that affect their personal and musical wellbeing. In comparison to the other helping professions, however, the lack of a recognized ethic of malpraxis in teaching is a serious and on-going ethical weakness.

In practice, the virtue ethic of caring relies on Aristotle’s four so-called “secondary” intellectual virtues: first, acquiring knowledge needed for effective decision-making; second, skills for diagnosing what is ‘right’ and just; third, the understanding needed for analyzing relevant variables; and, finally, the resourcefulness and versatility that effectively takes into account differences between individuals and situations. Such *praxial knowledge* has many sources, including study, research, and reflective *praxis* (e.g., action research).

Importantly, in Aristotle’s virtue ethics *practical wisdom is always subordinate to philosophical virtue!* He writes that philosophy “makes us aim at the right mark,

and practical wisdom makes us take the right means” (Aristotle 1998: 155). “Good teaching,” then, is *not* a matter of first deciding on supposedly ‘good methods’ and materials; rather, it is a matter of *first* using reason to envision philosophically warranted ‘right [excellent] ends’, *then* carefully choosing the ‘right [excellent] means’ and pragmatically evaluating the virtue and value of teaching according to how well the pragmatic end(s)-in-view were realized.

As viewed by virtue ethics, then, teaching music is inescapably an ethical and, therefore, a praxial endeavor, not *techne* or a craft-like collection of ‘one-size-fits-all’, ‘what works’, ‘best practices’, methods, materials, techniques, or strategies. It is a professional and thus ethical ‘doing’ that exists and is continually ‘practiced’ to help students become more musically and humanly functional. Those results are the ends-in-view that determine ethical action and qualify effective practices. Ultimately, then, “good teaching”—where “good” qualifies both the ethical dimension and the ‘good for’ served—draws from accumulated practical wisdom—praxial knowledge—that teachers build from a history of promoting ‘right [excellent] results’.

Virtue ethics and school music

Virtue ethics reinforces key principles from both duty and consequentialist ethics, yet makes its own contribution to applied ethics.

First, as with consequentialist ethics, the concern of virtue ethics with ‘right results’ focuses on individual students. Accordingly, the ‘rightness’ or ‘goodness’ of results is properly judged in terms of meeting students’ individual needs. In music, the very existence of a world of different (and sometimes competing) *musics* testifies to different musical and social ‘goods’ that are served by those musics; not only different ‘goods’ served by music (e.g., music that is “good for” religion, ceremony, dancing, socializing, etc.) but the various musics that serve such “goods” differently, according to individuals and societies. When only a very narrow range of such musics are offered (for a given student, or for all students), the likelihood is great that individual musical and social ‘goods’ are being ignored and, thus, the ‘helping’ status of teaching actions falls professionally short of being fully ethical.

Next, and again in common with consequentialism, caring enough to be care-full [*sic*] entails vigilantly diagnosing students’ needs and providing for them via reflective practice. However, virtue ethics stresses the additional responsibility that music teachers should remain up-to-date and should develop the versatility needed to meet students’ always differing and ever-changing needs. As society, students, and music changes, so must music teachers change and adapt. In today’s world of rapid technological change, music “apps” for smart phones, tablets, and computers have become major sources of musical interest and modes of musicking. These media are ignored at the risk, first of all, of the increasing irrelevance of music education and its worsening legitimization crisis (i.e., need for ‘advocacy’); and, second of all, of failing to keep pace with the modes

that musicking can take for many students and citizens and, thus, of failing to meet their needs. For example, thanks to the available (and ever-growing apps), everyone who owns a smart phone already owns a musical instrument capable of serving a wide-range of musicking (Walker 2011), and ignoring this potential risks a serious ethical failing. Music teachers need not give up teaching the traditional music media; but given the availability of music apps (that range from performance, to composition, to “musicky” games; see Gouzouasis and Bakan 2011), music teachers need to keep up with the music world that extends well beyond traditional media and options.

Third, virtue ethics go beyond the good intentions and normative criteria of duty ethics. They insist that the teacher promote ‘right [excellent] results’, not just go through the motions of dutifully providing lessons that—no matter how much fun students may seem to have—lead to no discernible or long-term musical growth.

Next, such ‘right results’ need to make a significant and lasting practical difference in much the same sense understood by consequentialism. Failure to make such a difference—failure to have added consequential musical value to students’ lives—means that the claimed benefits have not been promoted for students in ways that ethically justify the time, effort, and expense involved to students, their parents, and society. Again, such failure also lacks virtue because it leaves students’ musical needs unmet.

Despite the continuing, common sense acceptance of functionalist criteria for schools and teaching, however, newer sociological theories of education go beyond the premises of the *social transmission* of ‘accepted culture’. According to *social transformation* models, for example, music educators should transform and empower students musically and thus help *transform* students and society—not just *transmit* “our musical heritage” and *reproduce* status quo criteria of ‘good taste’ and the like. And rather than transmitting ‘accepted culture’, *interpretive* theories of schooling are concerned with *constructing culture* in terms of individually and socially constituted contemporary meanings and values. These newer theories cannot be explored here, but music education is ethically responsible for responding to such changing conceptions of education and, as mentioned above, for preparing students for the rapidly changing world of music that already exists in society outside of school or the school years.

Fifth, Aristotle taught that virtue was qualified by what he calls the “precision” proper to a particular endeavor. He counsels that we must

not look for precision in all things alike, but in each class of things such precision as accords with the subject-matter, and so much as is appropriate to the inquiry. For a carpenter and geometer investigate the right angle in different ways; . . . We must act in the same way, then, in all other matters as well, . . .” (Aristotle 1998: 14).

In other words, different ends-in-view and needs have different ethical criteria. The “precision” involved in *training* professional musicians—the artistry, musicianship, technical excellence, musical standards, literature, etc.—is, then, neither the function

served by school music and amateur ensembles, nor the goal of those students who do not aspire to professional careers. The different aims and needs of most students requires a different kind of “precision,” a different kind of ethical and musical excellence; for example, those focused on serving students’ eventual musical needs as, for the most part, adult amateurs, and those useful to empowering graduates to take fullest advantage of the multiple forms of musical praxis in a society.

Finally, virtue exists only in contrast with its absence! Thus, if all teaching is “good enough,” it lacks virtue. Improved ethical and practical judgment benefits from experience, but the most useful learning experiences come from improving upon faulty judgments. Failure to acknowledge such weaknesses leaves music teachers free to employ the same collection of supposedly “good lessons” (or endless variations on them) without regard for the excellence (virtue) of results. Such a lack of professional accountability also ignores the ethical problems of malpraxis.

Conclusions: An applied ethics of music education

My conclusions point to an applied ethic of regarding music teaching as a professional *praxis*. The three normative ethical theories summarized here overlap to a fruitful degree. However, virtue theory, with its concept of teaching as professional praxis and, thus, with its corresponding ethic of care, is the most comprehensive for overlapping the most relevant contributions of duty and consequentialist ethics. Approached as a professional praxis, teaching music becomes at every step an ethical matter: the teacher thus focuses on *ethical* grounds and criteria for teaching choices and actions, not just on *musical* criteria. Decisions concerning *what* to teach and *why*, *how* to teach it, and *whether* (or the degree to which) teaching and learning have been successful all turn on the kinds of meta-ethical questions and principles sampled earlier. Each teaching decision, no matter how representative of a ‘type’ of situation, is its own “case,” and it requires the virtue of case-based analysis that considers situated particulars in terms of relevant ethical criteria.

Such an applied ethics of music education means that a teacher’s ethical responsibility is not fulfilled simply by dutifully going through the motions of offering instruction using traditional or standardized methods and materials, or simply of providing musical “experiences” and “activities.” An applied ethic of music education will be mindful of the intersecting criteria of duty, consequential, and virtue ethics. In particular, the ethic of care that regards teaching as a matter of ethical professional praxis will help promote the kinds of ‘right results’ for students and society that fulfill the function that the music education exists to provide as a helping profession. Mindfulness of the ethical dimensions of music education is thus an important part of the specialized knowledge teachers need if they are to most fully meet the ethical commitments of teaching as a helping profession.

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